

# ForumJournal

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## Stepping into the Future at Historic Sites



Enhanced Content: Takeaway  
Collections Position Paper

**When Buildings and  
Landscapes Are the  
Collection**

# NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN THE UNITED STATES

## EXPANDING THE COLLECTION TO INCLUDE HISTORIC STRUCTURES AND LANDSCAPES

### **Introduction**

Historic house museums and historic sites throughout the United States provide public benefit in unique and varied ways. They preserve significant buildings, landscapes and objects for the future; educate the public about the history of the United States; commemorate historic events and significant historic figures; provide places of beauty, respite, and rejuvenation; and sustain communities by furnishing gathering spaces and reinforcing a shared identity. At these institutions, the historic buildings or landscapes are often the primary artifacts preserved, maintained, and interpreted for the public. Many sites also house significant collections of historic objects, such as paintings, sculpture, furniture and other decorative arts that are similarly preserved, maintained and interpreted for the public.

Acknowledging this reality, historic sites have begun to broaden their definition of museum collections to include historic buildings and landscapes. Yet questions remain about this approach and about whether the same ethical standards applicable to collections objects should be applied to a historic site's buildings and grounds. The National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States examined the issues presented by the inclusion of historic buildings and landscapes in an organization's museum collections, and determined that historic buildings and landscapes may be treated as museum collections as long as they are held for public benefit and interpreted to the public because of their historic, architectural or other cultural value. The guidance in this statement is intended to assist other organizations in charting their way through this issue.

### ***Background***

Organizations that operate historic house museums and historic sites have long struggled with the application of ethical standards for museum collections in the context of their missions and operations. These institutions are often charged with the stewardship of highly diverse collections that include decorative arts, fine arts, ordinary household furnishings, archival materials, archaeological artifacts, and

architectural elements that have been acquired, catalogued, and utilized in a variety of ways. They are also expected to preserve and interpret the historic structures and landscapes under their ownership. In this context, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, as the country's only national non-profit organization focused on historic preservation that owns and operates historic sites, is ideally positioned to explore the existing standards related to collections at historic sites and house museums and establish a policy about how such standards could be tailored to this particular category of museum properties.

This analysis began by raising a series of questions. How can a collections policy comprehensively address the particular needs of the different stewardship obligations toward historic objects and historic structures and landscapes at historic sites and house museums? Beyond these object collections, are historic buildings and landscapes held for the benefit of the public in the same way as other types of collections? Do different historic buildings on a site provide different degrees of public benefit? What duties does the owner or steward of a historic site owe to the public with regard to its primary historic buildings? Should or could the proceeds from the disposition of collections objects be used by the organization for the care of the building or grounds that are also treated as interpreted artifacts? Would the use of proceeds for the care of historic structures and landscapes be a violation of ethical standards, or worse, a violation of the organization's duty of fiduciary responsibility to the public?

The National Trust recognizes that the historic buildings and landscapes at National Trust Historic Sites are primary resources held for the benefit of the public. As a result, the National Trust is considering formally recognizing, through a proposed revision to its Collections Management Policy, that each historic site contains a collection of buildings and landscapes as well as a collection of objects, both of which are museum collections held for and interpreted for the benefit of the public. Proposed revisions to the policy would also recognize that the use of proceeds from the disposition of collections objects could be used (with appropriate conditions) for the care of collections of building and landscape collections, and vice versa.

### **Ethical Standards**

There are two primary ethical statements that historic house museums and historic sites typically follow. The first is the American Alliance of Museums' (AAM) *Code of Ethics for Museums* (Adopted 1991, amended 2000). The second is the American Association for State and Local History's (AASLH) *Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics* (June 2012). Both address the care of resources entrusted to the museum or historic site and the use of proceeds from de-accessioning. Although interpretations vary, and museum professionals may differ, both ethical statements may be interpreted to permit the

inclusion of historic buildings and landscapes into the museum collections and the use of proceeds from the disposition of collections objects for care of buildings or landscapes that are accessioned.

The American Alliance of Museums *Code of Ethics for Museums* begins with the statement that “Museums make their unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving and interpreting the things of this world.” This list of types of museums includes *historic sites* along with art museums and aquariums. Like other organizations that own, operate and interpret historic places, the National Trust recognizes that the historic structures and landscapes it owns are among the primary “things of this world” that the organizations preserves and interprets. The National Trust’s Congressional charter states the purpose of the National Trust is “*to facilitate public participation in the preservation of sites, buildings, and objects of national significance or interest.*”

The AAM *Code of Ethics* states that “disposal of collections through sale, trade or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum’s mission. Proceeds from the sale of nonliving collections are to be used consistent with the established standards of the museum’s discipline, but in no event shall they be used for anything other than acquisition or direct care of collections.” The National Trust and other organizations that own historic sites recognize that the historic structures and landscapes are part of the collections that they hold for the benefit of the public and their care fulfills the organization’s preservation mission. In applying this standard, the National Trust’s proposed revisions to its Collections Management Policy, which would establish criteria for a historic structures and landscapes collection, would also permit the use of disposition proceeds from collections objects for the direct care of historic structures and landscapes.

The AASLH *Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics* provides:

Historical resources—including collections, built environment, cultural landscapes, archaeological sites, and other evidence of the past, provide the tools through which we interact with the past and are the bedrock upon which the practice of history rests. In fulfillment of their public trust, historical organizations and those associated with them must be responsible stewards and advocates on behalf of the historical resources within their care and throughout their communities.

- A. Association members shall give priority to the care and management of the historical resources within their care and always shall act to preserve their physical and intellectual integrity.
- B. Institutions shall manage historical resources, in accord with comprehensive policies officially adopted by their governing authorities.
- C. Historical resources shall not be capitalized or treated as financial assets.

- D. Collections shall not be deaccessioned or disposed of in order to provide financial support for institutional operations, facilities maintenance or any reason other than preservation or acquisition of collections, as defined by institutional policy.
- E. Historical resources shall be acquired, cared for and interpreted with sensitivity to their cultural origins.
- F. It is important to document the physical condition of historical resources, including past treatment of objects, and to take appropriate steps to mitigate potential hazards to people and property.

The AASLH Standards treat the buildings and cultural landscapes as historical resources, and establish a standard that the holding organization shall act to preserve their physical and intellectual integrity. At most National Trust Historic Sites, the buildings are the primary artifacts that are interpreted to the public. For example, at Drayton Hall, in South Carolina, the main mansion is interpreted to the public with very few collections. The primary focus of the preservation and interpretation of the site is focused on the main building. At other sites, the buildings contain accessioned museum collections, such as at Lyndhurst, in Tarrytown, NY, which contains furniture designed for the property by the original architect, A.J. Davis, as well as objects belonging to Jay Gould and his daughters. Both the building and the objects are interpreted to the public concurrently. At the Pope-Leighey House in Alexandria, Virginia, some built-in furnishings are physically connected to the building and others were made from the same materials as the house in order to create a seamless composition. At Phillip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, the 67 acre landscape was consciously designed by Johnson and his partner David Whitney and is inseparable from the site's buildings—particularly the transparent primary structure.

In recognition of the fact that the historic buildings are the primary artifacts held for the benefit of the public, the National Trust is considering revising its Collections Management Policy to recognize that its historic structures and landscapes that are accessible and interpreted to the public are a part of the National Trust's collection, equal in standing to other collections of furnishings and fine arts, archival materials, archaeological artifacts, and architectural elements that have been removed from buildings. The National Trust views the preservation of the historic structures and landscapes that are interpreted to the public as its primary duty of care. The structures and landscapes are not capitalized nor treated as financial assets.<sup>1</sup> In considering the inclusion of the structures and landscapes in its collections, the National Trust recognizes that this would essentially establish a standard of care comparable to the standard of care for objects. The buildings to be included are therefore limited to those that are accessible to and interpreted for the public.

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<sup>1</sup> Historic real estate that is held for resale may be capitalized, but the primary historic sites that are interpreted to the public are not capitalized.

The AASLH *Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics* also includes the statement that collections shall not be de-accessioned or disposed of in order to provide financial support for institutional operations, facilities maintenance or any reason other than preservation or acquisition of collections, as defined by institutional policy. The proposed changes to the National Trust's Collections Management Policy will encourage the application of this standard to the historic structures and landscapes, as well as object collections. This change provides equivalent treatment for buildings, landscapes and objects as assets held for the benefit of the public.

Prior to the change in the Collections Management Policy, proceeds from de-accessioning would only have been available for the preservation of collections objects, not the buildings or landscapes. This limitation did not recognize that the historic structures and landscapes are held for the benefit of the public in the same manner as the objects. In the event that objects are de-accessioned and disposed of, the proceeds will now be available for preservation or acquisition of structures or landscapes that meet the criteria of providing public benefit. Conversely, the proceeds from the sale of historic buildings or landscapes that meet these criteria would now be expressly directed toward the preservation or acquisition of other portions of the collection, such as furnishings and fine arts or other historic buildings or landscapes that provide public benefit. The application of these proceeds would be limited to the site where the deaccessioned item originated but, if that site ceased to be a part of the National Trust's collection, the proceeds could be applied to other sites owned by the organization.

#### Protections to Avoid Abuse.

In considering these changes to the Collections Management Policy to create a collection of historic structures and landscapes, the National Trust acknowledges the fact that permitting disposition proceeds from objects to be used for historic structures and landscapes also raises two primary concerns. How could we ensure that the objects collections wouldn't be "cherry picked" to raise funds without considering the integrity of the entire collection, and how could we ensure that the funds would be used only for "direct care" and not for operating expenses or facilities maintenance.

To avoid "cherry-picking," the policy is clear that the de-accessioning process must continue to be guided by established criteria. An object is only considered for de-accessioning if it is found to be damaged or destroyed, is determined to be unrelated to the scope of collecting for that site, does not support the mission or interpretation of the site, or has been irreversibly altered beyond interpretive use. As a part of the proposed revision of the Collections Management Policy, de-accessioning must be reviewed and

recommended for approval by the organization's Collections Committee (which includes the Senior Vice-president of Historic Sites), the Chief Preservation Officer, and a subcommittee of the Preservation and Historic Sites Committee of the Board of Trustees. (An option for the subcommittee to refer the matter to the full Board of Trustees will also be included in the revised policy.) Furthermore, the de-accessioning process is separate from the application of the proceeds. The Policy states that no decision shall be made as to the use of funds from the sale of de-accessioned objects before the de-accessioning is approved by the Collections Committee and that the specific use of any proceeds must be approved by the Collections Committee, which will ensure that proceeds are used for direct care and not for operations or facilities maintenance. The policy states expressly that the funds from the sale of de-accessioned objects shall be used only for the replenishment or direct care of collections.

#### Distinctions From Other Institutions.

*Art Museums.* Art museums often subscribe to a separate ethical standard promulgated by the Association of Art Museum Directors, the *Professional Practices in Art Museums* and AAMD's Policy on Deaccessioning. The AAMD Policy prohibits the use of disposition proceeds for any purpose other than acquisition of other items for the collection. Most historic sites and preservation organizations do not accept this policy as appropriate for their institutions because the standards are specifically created for art museums, which typically have only fine arts objects in their collections. Indeed, the American Alliance of Museums *Code of Ethics* encourages institutions to apply the standards of their own discipline, further underscoring the need for policies that are tailored to the particular missions, collections, and operations of historic sites and house museums.

*Colleges and Universities.* Many of the controversies considering de-accessioning and the use of disposition proceeds in recent years have occurred in the college or university context. Colleges that had art collections chose to de-accession and sell individual pieces or entire collections in order to fulfill their primary mission of education. These situations are distinct from historic sites and preservation organizations because the colleges were choosing to apply the disposition proceeds to operating expenses or other educational programs related to their educational mandate. The policy being proposed by the National Trust simply recognizes that the historic structures may also be considered part of the collections, and would permit the use of disposition proceeds for the preservation or care of the historic structures that are primary to the organization's mission and are also held for the public benefit.

## **Conclusion**

After an examination of its own stewardship obligations and mission, as well as the applicable ethical standards, the National Trust is proposing to modify its collections management policy to allow for the accessioning of historic structures and landscapes as well as objects. For historic sites and preservation organizations, accessioning historic structures and landscapes into collections may allow for equal treatment for the major types of historic resources that historic sites typically preserve and interpret to the public – historic structures, landscapes and objects. Creating this parity for historic structures and landscapes will permit the application of equivalent direct care for all these resources, including care funded by the disposition of de-accessioned collection objects.

While these changes may seem to some to be a simply a common sense reflection of the multi-faceted stewardship of historic sites and house museums, the National Trust acknowledges that altering its Collections Management Policy in this way represents a significant moment in the evolution of these institutions and, therefore, it has undertaken this process—and will implement the resulting changes—in a careful and deliberate fashion. These changes should serve to enhance the public benefit provided by the National Trust and more accurately reflect the National Trust’s mission and the dynamic interplay between all aspects of preservation and interpretation at its historic sites.

We encourage other historic sites and preservation organizations that subscribe to the AAM *Code of Ethics for Museums* and the AASLH *Statement of Professional Standards and Ethic* to consider the possibility of accessioning historic structures and landscapes in recognition that all these resources are held for the public benefit.